DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 225 230 EA 015 027

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TITLE Educational Innovators Then and Now.
INSTITUTION Washington Univ., St. Louis, Mo.
SPONS AGENCY National Inst. of Education (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE Mar 82
GRANT NIE-G-78-0074
NOTE 16p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (New York, NY, March 19-23, 1982). For related documents, see EA 015 025-028.
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Administrator Attitudes; *Educational Innovation; Elementary Education; Experimental Schools; *Geographic Location; Geographic Regions; Interviews; Municipalities; Nontraditional Education; *Religion; Religious Factors; *Teacher Attitudes
IDENTIFIERS *Kensington School MO

ABSTRACT

Researchers conducted lengthy face-to-face interviews with 17 of the 21 faculty members who had been at Kensington School (Missouri) during its first 2 years (1964-1966), when the elementary school was at its most innovative. The interviews covered the former faculty members' perceptions of the Kensington experience, the effects of Kensington on their lives and careers, and changes in their lives and careers in the 15 years since Kensington. Each interview was conducted by two researchers, who shared the roles of interviewer and observer. Besides noting that the former faculty maintained little mutual contact, the researchers identified six themes, only two of which are discussed in this paper. The first theme involved the connection between the strong religious feelings and backgrounds of many former faculty and the quality of secular "religion" and "true belief" that educational innovation held for the Kensington faculty. The second theme concerned the former faculty members' return to their earlier origins, not only intellectual but geographical. Five had returned to the city where they grew up, and eight had returned to the same region. (RW)

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Educational Innovators Then and Now

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EA 015 027

This research has been supported by NIE Grant #G78-0074. This report represents official policy of neither NIE nor the Milford School District.

Presented as part of the symposium "Innovation and Change in American Education, Kensington Revisited: A 15 Year Follow-up of an Innovative School and Its Faculty." AERA Annual Meeting, New York City, March, 1982.

1. Introduction

Two dozen educators, heeding the clarion call to "build a school" gathered in Kensington in 1964 and spent a year or two engaged in the deadly serious business of translating cliches into curricula; logos into lesson plans. The ability, energy and commitment of the staff were attested to by Smith and Keith (1971) in Anatomy of Educational Innovation:

> ...Kensington was an important but temporary training ground, a step for many of the staff as they searched to create careers as professional innovators. Commitment was to issues and ideas as well as to anything as place-bound as the generation of social structure of a beginning, fledgling organization. The ideas were portable, applicable elsewhere, and the educational world was waiting... (p. 117)

So wrote the researchers a decade ago as they analyzed the motive structure of the Kensington faculty, a faculty chosen for its commitment and belief that a new educational day was dawning. This was a young, bright faculty, eager and impatient to get on with the sunrise. Heavy work schedules, late meetings, home preparations, interpersonal conflicts, pressure from parents and peers had all been borne at least willingly, if not gladly; all for the cause.

The mixed fruits of their collective labors and their brief two year existence as an elementary school faculty was chronicled by Smith and Keith before the participants left the district and pursued other challenges. Fifteen years have passed since these educators planned and worked to build a new and better school for elementary children.

Where are they now? We chose to find the people and trace the impact of the Kensington experience on their personal and professional lives at several levels. First, we ascertained their perceptions of the earlier experience. Why had they been attracted to heed the call to build an innovative school? How did they remember the experience? Which people or events remain a significant memory 15 years later? How did they judge the success or failure of the experience?

Second, what effect, if any, did the Kensington experience have on their personal and professional lives? Have they changed their educational idealogies in the ensuing years, or do they still hold some of the same philosophical tenets of 1964? How did the Kensington experience fit into the fabric of their professional lives? What use, if any, do they make of that previous experience as they go about their work in the 1980's?

Finally, and more broadly, how have the lives and careers of these educators changed over the past 15 years? Where have they been, what have they done, and what are their hopes and ambitions still to be fulfilled?

2. Research Process

The first step in the research process was to methodically trace down each of the teachers and administrators involved in the original Kensington and to secure their participation in a follow-up study. Through a variety of interesting and circuitous routes we found all but one of the original 21 and interviewed 17 of them in taped face-to-face

interviews ranging in length from two to seven hours. Two we talked with more briefly on the telephone. One is deceased.

As an aside on the methodological issue, we were rather surprised that so few links existed among the participants. We had hoped for an intricate network of Christmas card lists or other forms of address links but found none. Two couples and two individuals have remained in close contact with one another but beyond these pairs, the routes from Kensington were varied and disparate: Our participants were found in California, Oregon, Minnesota, Michigan, Wisconsin, Missouri, Nebraska, Texas, and Florida.

Interview Techniques Most of our interviews were conducted with the participant and both researchers present. Initially we selected this technique because we both wanted to be present for the early interviews as we were shaping our guiding questions and didn't want to miss the early content emerging from the interviews. We fully intended to then split the remaining individuals and conduct the interviews with just one of us present. As frequently occurs, serendipity smiled and we saw definite advantages in our approach. First, the role of interviewer and observer can be interchanged allowing one researcher to "back off," pay attention to more subtle cues indicating tension, threat or other mechanisms and then pursue those leads or redirect questioning if that is more appropriate. Second, the observing one of the pair can chart out a line of questioning more leisurely and pursue that route to give the other interviewer a chance to relax and "re-load." Third, the observer can go back over notes and pick up leads for further elaboration which is more difficult to do when in the actual line of questioning.

Fourth, different interviewers develop lines of questioning which are highly efficient and each can develop a specialty with the "two-platoon" system of interviewing. Fifth, interviewers can cover for one another's mistakes very effectively. At times an interviewer phrases a question poorly and the other edits or elaborates the question. Again, there are times when one interviewer is simply having a bad day and the other carries a greater share of the load. The obvious necessity for two people to be attuned to one another's strengths and weaknesses is a prerequisite for this technique. Sixth, the difference in personality match-ups allows a greater rapport with some participants than others. Sensing this allows the better match-ups to be utilized to a greater extent.

Cautions The obvious advantages of this method carry potential liabilities as well. Perhaps the most important caution is the need to be sensitive to the participant's response. The dual interview could be a very demanding and exhausting experience both because of the fresh supply of questions but also because the contrasting styles of the interviewers could become tension producing. The ethical responsibilities for interviewers are doubly important when the additional pressure of a second interviewer is added. Also, if one is not careful, the two interviewers can spend time talking to one another and dominate the discussion unnecessarily.

3. The Major Emergent Strands

Six themes emerged from the analysis of the interview tapes and two of these six will be briefly discussed in this paper. Due to time

constraints the remaining four will be mentioned in the closing remarks, but will not be developed further here.

Strand One: Religion, Reform, and Education The first theme could be termed, "Educational Reform as Secular Religion" or as one of our chapter titles currently reads, "Change Religions but Keep the Faith." Smith and Keith (1971) had earlier described in detail the phenomonon of true belief as it was displayed in the original Kensington, drawing on Eric Hoffer and used such terms as "framework of faith" (p. 106), "cultish" (p. 108), and "the unassailable belief" (p. 109) to help describe the depth of commitment held by the faculty and administration. They concluded, "He who would engage in large-scale innovative programs must be cognizant of the role of true belief that is endemic to the process" (p. 116).

For a number of the faculty the passage of years had not dimmed the religious commitment to an educational ideal. For some, the years had altered the means but not the ends, for others even the means had not been changed. There was evidence that the commitment carried both a secular component as well as the more typical examples of religiosity. Some had rekindled early commitments to organized religion while others had rejected rather violently the role of organized religion but retained a strong ethical, moral component. Finally, some had undergone rather dramatic religious conversion as "born again" Christians. The strong belief theme, so evident in the original Kensington as a commitment to an educational ideology appears to have sprung from a much broader religious base than was earlier realized.

As examples emerged from our tapes we began to refer to a "missionary" quality which seemed to exude from the interviews even though not all of the participants would consider themselves to be religious. Our "missionaries" were Protestant, Jewish, Catholic, Agnostic, and Athiestic but they shared a drive and moral commitment which appeared as a powerful force in their lives.

Clearly there were differences in the group. About a half dozen faculty could be termed "Sustainers." These six Latter Day Kensingtarians had sustained their church or synagogue connections and maintained their fervent desire to improve and enhance public education either through full time professional efforts or through part time involvement in voluntary association with local schools. The sustainers had developed a view which integrated family, religion, and education in a coherent and articulated manner.

A smaller subset of the faculty might be labeled as Intensifiers in that the early fervor and commitment of youth had apparently been allowed to wane during the early part of the post-Kensington's years and there had gradually been a rekindling of interest in the typical pattern which includes marriage, children, and an investment in the community.

Finally, a third group of four faculty manifested a more dramatic modification which has been labeled Reactionary. This group included those who had undergone rather sharp disallusionment with religion as well as some who had been converted in equally dramatic fashion. Regardless of whether one jumped into or out of religious persuasion, there

remained a fascination with belief which persuaded the observers that the issue has been only temporarily resolved and that the final word had yet to be spoken on the issue. At best, an uneasy truce appeared to have been struck with religion conviction.

The three categories represent nothing unique in and of themselves in that nearly any group could be allowed to scatter for 15 years, be restudied and points on a religious continuum could be located for each person in the original group. What appeared unique was the intensity with which the staff continued to feel and believe after the passage of 15 years.

The present data seem to leave little doubt that many of the original staff shared an idealogical commitment which grew out of a rather intense religious socialization. Consider the following:

1. The superintendent of the district and the principal he selected to implement the school were fellow Bible class students for several years earlier in their careers. The close church contacts led to family social exchanges and some years later the working relationships in the Milford District.
2. One teacher had been active as a youth lay minister and maintained the ministerial functions in addition to his career as an educator.
3. One teacher spent his youth in various Jewish youth and athletic groups and has maintained a position of leadership in his temple.
4. One teacher, in addition to an active church life is married to an exseminarian with several years of theological training.
5. One teacher was active in the preaching ministry just prior to undertaking graduate work in education which led to employment at Kensington.
6. One teacher completed undergraduate work in theology, attended divinity school and served a year as an intern in the parish ministry before joining the Kensington staff.
7. One teacher had plans after high school to become an agricultural missionary following a very active involvement in his local church.

The presence and importance of these facts we had clearly missed in our earlier work. The full import of their meaning remains a major conceptual and interpretive problem for the current analysis. To this point, "educational reform as secular religion" captures one part of our understanding and "change religions but keep the faith" captures another facet of the same stone.

Strand Two: You DO Go Home Again

> But why had he always felt so strongly the magnetic pull of home, why had he thought so much about it and remembered it with such blazing accuracy, if it did not matter, and if this little town and the immortal hills around it, was not the only home he had on earth? He did not know. All that he knew was that the years flow by like water, and that one day men come home again. (Wolfe, 1934, p. 89)

Thomas Wolfe tapped a cultural yearning which seemed descriptive of many of our participants as a second major strand emerging from our interviews. As we puzzled over the life style changes resulting from a decade and a half of meandering about the landscape we were struck with some obvious commonalities. Individuals were drawn from diverse backgrounds, shared a common experience and then seeped their way back through a series of moves until they had achieved a reasonable fit with earlier origins. In one way or another the Kensingtonians wanted to "go home." Not surprisingly, few would describe their present location as being sought to effect a return to earlier origins. People lived where they lived and are doing what they're going because it was "convenient," represented an "advancement," just seemed the "right" thing to be doing now but no one expressed the need to return to the roots from which one sprang. That is our conclusion and we feel very strongly that the pull described by Wolfe was a powerful and seductive one for many participants.

The "natives' return" was certainly not a simple one in that not all returned to the exact geographical origins of birth (but a few did); not all pursued life styles or living arrangements as their parents (but a few did) and not all returned to the exact value structures or belief systems of their parents (but a few did that also). What we observed was a complex series of life iterations in which the opportunities presented and the needs expressed were roughly matched and then fine tuned. Individuals sought out, consciously or unconsciously, the best solution which would approximate the replication of those earlier times. For some it was a geographical return, for some it was an intellectual revisit and for others a re-emergence of attitudes and values laid down at an earlier time.

Geographic and Intellectual Return No less than five of the original staff returned to the very same towns or cities in which they grew up. After a series of moves which took them to rather far flung locations, each of the five answered Wolfe's call and returned home. Nor were these simple patterns involving a year or two of teaching and then returning home to marry the local druggist to raise a family and settle down. One person moved through a series of stops in an Eastern city, a university in the Southwest and finally accepting a position as Dean in the very college from which he graduated years before. Another taught a year or two, finished most of a Ph.D. at a distinguished midwestern university and then returned home to live within a few blocks of her early socialization. A third staff member moved every two or three years from one federal project to another in various parts of the country with an extended stay in the nation's capitol before returning to teach in the same secondary school from which he graduated 24 years before. Two

Two more people returned immediately to their city of birth and have remained there. The frequency of the returns to the exact place of origin is perhaps less striking than the surprising nature of the individuals involved. Based on the high degree of drive, mobility, and commitment to "building a better world" which seemed to characterize these individuals one might have predicted a more sustained departure from the early origins and yet upon closer analysis it is less startling. In three of the cases, the individuals returned home to achieve the same idealistic outcomes sought in the earlier experience at Kensington. One explicitly returned to help students become aware of the wide world he had experienced and to encourage them to feel free to sample freely from that world:

> I don't want to be in Washington right now or Dade County or Houston--I don't want to be principal over here in this elementary school either. But I think, you know, I think that where I am right now is to be working with the kids that are at the same place that I was in 1948, 1950 and to say to those kids, but not verbally, but to demonstrate to those kids that you can walk out of this town and you can do whatever you want to, you can go all the way to the White House if you want to and you can come back here if you want. I think that's a big part of what this country's about and a big part of public education's about and you know, I don't feel like that I made "my contribution," it's not that, it's just that I worked on a societal level, I worked at the institutional level and right now I'm working on the instructional level.
>
> (Taped Interview, 1980)

The pull of "going home" was clearly meshed with the desire to continue the good fight which characterized the earlier years at Kensington. The untangling of rationale from rationalization is impossible with such limited data but the likelihood that motives sometimes precede action and sometimes are created after the fact is clearly an intriguing possibility.

A second staff member returned home with a strong commitment to help his Alma Mater reach out into the community to help students in a way which he and other poor kids of his generation had not been helped. Far from retreating or resigning to a slower pace the following passage describes this individual's continued struggle with liberal causes even while returning to the friendly confines of the home community.

> We still have what is referred to here as Nigger town...was when I was there and still is, amazing! The grade point average (for Blacks) is 1.87 according to the Vice Chancellor and they just instituted a policy that I opposed....I think I was the only opposing vote in all of Central City...which would increase the standards at the University from no standards to something like if you have a 1.5 for three semesters you're not allowed to enroll again. I would like to see anything done that would increase the number of Black population on campus and I thought the word would get out that we all of a sudden had standards and to confirm that my suspicions were true...that it was a poor policy...the local newspaper came out in favor of it so that was irreconcilable proof that it's a poor idea...
>
> Observer: You were the only one voting against that increase in standards?
>
> I argued for two hours in the deans' council meeting and the arguments I heard were the same ones I've heard for 25 years... which had almost no merit at all...the strange paradox is, and this is one of my latest deals, is that the...if students fail in class it's as much...it's the fault of the system...not the fault of the student and so paradoxically here we're talking about high standards...there was no discussion of the fact that the reason the students were doing poorly is because we give them a C-professor, which is about what we have...we give them a textbook by a...someone...the reading level is two or three years advanced from theirs...which seems to be of no concern to any professor...we have no programmed instruction...we have them all take the same test...we don't have differentiated tests....we don't have differentiated rates...then you say we're going to have high standards...well, why shouldn't there be some discussion of the weakness of the system to supply adequate resources. (Taped Inverview, 1979)

The vividness and passion expressed are a clear indication of the individual's continued commitment to the education of poor and minority students.

Regional Returns In addition to those returning to the exact towns and cities of their origin, another eight returned to the same region of the country from which they originated. Hidden within the massive mobility statistics are those people who move out and then return which has the ironic result of appearing to support instability and change when in fact, the return of many to similar regions or settings is a tribute to the stability hidden within the flux. Four individuals were attracted from the south to spend one or two years at Kensington to then return; three to the southwest and one to the southeast. Four more were attracted from the upper midwest and returned; two to the original state and the other two slipped across the state line into a bordering state. Thus 15 staff members have returned within close proximity to their early origins. When you add to this number the three who never left the Kensington area, only four have not returned to their home of origin.

The implications of this return rate are both obvious and not so obvious to those who argue for attracting teachers from a diverse geographic and cultural background. For the receiving schools, such as Kensington, it would appear that such attraction is often of brief duration. But in the return home the individuals bring with them a store of experience illustrating and augmenting intellectual, value, and ideological perspectives. In addition, the niches and positions they fill are also very different.

4. Concluding Thoughts

Time does not permit the elaboration of four additional patterns emerging from the data. One of these threads deals with the origins and maintenance of educational ideology. A second thread deals with organizational niches and career opportunities for educationists. A third theme to be developed requires an examination of continuity and change in personality which blends personal and professional contributions. Fourth, we will look at professional education particularly at the doctoral level, which for our participants was a disaster for reform minded practioners.

Several personal and perhaps more peripheral notes close this brief presentation:

1. The excitement and genuine satisfaction of returning to study and interact with the original Kensington participants is hard to adequately convey. The 15 year interval appeared to disappear in moments and the quality and spark of the interviews appeared to be reciprocally rewarding.
2. The richness of the data for examining complex questions of long term innovation in education appear worth the tremendous cost in time, energy, and money.
3. The blending of both personal and professional insights impressed us as being absolutely essential for a clear understanding of continuity and change in either of those areas. Our interviews constantly shifted between and among the personal, social, and professional worlds of the participants as they unravelled their last decade and a half.
4. Finally, if there's a way to do educational research that's more fun, we'd like to know about it.

For us, these observations begin to raise questions if not doubts regarding the very nature of educational research methods and paradigms as well as the kind of abstractions needed to handle the phenomena of innovation in a theory of schooling.

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